

Getting Your Priorities Straight in a Bi-Polar Relationship

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When I met my wife Amanda, I was not looking for a committed relationship. I had reached the end of a grueling period in the military and I was ready for greener pastures and, “freedom.”

We met at a bar and we had mutual friends. I was struck by her red hair and as she remembers me saying, “her purple shirt and white pants.” My in-laws describe my behavior that night likened to a puppy but I’d call that exaggerated.

I was smitten. I didn’t intend on a long term relationship. I was moving away and I just didn’t see how we could make long distance work.

We made it work. Love is a powerful thing.

I learned early on that Amanda had been diagnosed with Bi-Polar 1 Disorder. I didn’t know much at the start but understood quickly that her life was not like mine.

I never had a lot of trouble finding my way in life. I set goals, often times accomplished them and I built solid relationships along the way. I wasn’t perfect. I was self centered, a know it all and often times insensitive. Despite these faults however, I carried through life OK.

Amanda was diagnosed when she was 19. Her behavior became erratic in high school and carried into her first attempt at college. Her friends and family learned quickly that her disorder could upend her entire life at any time. Amanda had to learn that despite the brightness of her youth, her adulthood would be moderated through medication, therapy and risk aversion.

When we met, she was really just coming to terms with that reality. Looking back, I understand how important it was for us to have met at this time because if she hadn't reached this point of acceptance, I never could have learned.

I really didn't understand what it meant to lead a life of limitation. I had only ever been limited by the choices I made and by my imagination.

When I lost a night of sleep for whatever reason, I felt tired and cranky. When Amanda lost a night or two of sleep, everyday anxiety could easily send her into a tailspin.

I never had to take medication and I really never dealt with anyone who did. When Amanda forgot to take her medication, especially the crucial ones, she was on her way into a tailspin or even worse, to the hospital.

Although it was often painful, over time, I learned what it was like to be limited. There was no shortage of meltdowns in those first few years. I felt sorry for myself at times of course and many of the people in my life showed real concern.

Love is a powerful thing.

Beyond the power of love carrying us through the darkest of times, I found there is tremendous power in discipline. The military had taught me discipline in the most extreme terms. I appreciated its value in a military context of course but beyond that, I had never thought about how it would translate into my life outside of the military.

With each passing falter and subsequent meltdown, I learned a lesson I never forgot. I helped ensure Amanda was rested, she took her medication and she effectively managed her stress through self moderation and therapy.

It felt strange to take such an overbearing role in a relationship but as I stood my ground on the boundaries I thought made the most difference, I found that it worked. Over time, as we both agreed to and adhered to a prioritization of key boundaries, our life together became more stable.

While the medication and sleep problems were straightforward, anxiety is more complex. To effectively manage someone else's anxiety, you cannot be clouded by your own. I found that when I became overwhelmed by my own anxiety, I missed the signs that Amanda was overwhelmed.

Anxiety led to meltdown after meltdown but I eventually learned that for our relationship to thrive, I had to take my own anxieties and health, head on.

The more I have succeeded in this effort, the more our relationship has thrived. Amanda still gets overwhelmed by anxiety and admittedly so do I, but less.

5 years later and we have a beautiful 1 year old daughter and together as a family we are thriving. Amanda has turned out to be an incredible mother with an appreciation for disciplined schedules and regimens and although I appreciate the discipline, at times the strict adherence is another manifestation of anxiety.

For us, creating a thriving family life in spite of our challenges was about understanding our priorities. Above all else, we prioritize our boundaries. We get enough sleep, exercise, medication, reading, therapy, and all of these take discipline.

Our other priority however is to understand that if we are taking care of ourselves to the best of our ability through discipline, we need to relax within the boundaries. We need to encourage each other to let go of stress enjoy the moment. We need to make each other laugh, to watch netflix, to reconnect with family, to speak weird baby languages with our daughter, to sing, and to show affection.

There were times that I felt sorry for myself for falling in love with Amanda because her burden became my burden. Now I understand that I'm extremely lucky. I've learned the incredible power of priorities and I know in my bones that honoring these priorities on a daily basis leads to a deep sense of happiness and contentment.